NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Baltimore: Homecoming

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 13, 2013 Distinctly Catholic
Fall bishops' meeting 2013

Today, the bishops go into executive session and I head back to Washington. The annual "homecoming," which is what a USCCB meeting always feels like, comes to a close for us scribes even if the bishops must now attend to their most pressing issues behind closed doors.

The homecoming metaphor applies to both bishops and religions news writers. You run into people you don't see at any other time of the year. You swap stories and get caught up. There are elements of continuity and discontinuity: You run into one of the retired bishops who always has something to say, but he is a bit more frail than last year. You meet some of the new bishops. I recall about two years ago, coming to the shocking realization that there were now some bishops younger than myself. I felt very old. This year, one of the most obvious points of discontinuity was the fact that Ann Rodgers, long-time religion writer for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, was no longer sitting with the scribes but working the floor in her new position as communications director for the Diocese of Pittsburgh. "Gone over to the other side," we teased her.

Because we live in an ideological age, we tend to view the proceedings of a USCCB meeting through an ideological lens. There are certainly differences of intellectual disposition among the bishops, but more and more I realize that what drives the elections for officers and committee chairmen is a different set of questions: Is this someone who has listened to me in the past? Do I like this guy? Will he return my calls? Does he run a good meeting? There is a prosaic element to these choices that is often overlooked.

Indeed, much of a bishop's job is prosaic. Their statements about hot-button issues tend to garner all the media attention, but a bishop is likely to spend more time raising money for the charities of his diocese, or dealing with personnel issues, or evaluating policies and procedures, than issuing statements of public import. This week, one of the most discussed issues among the bench was not the HHS mandate, but the need to collect funds for the suffering people of the Philippines. Many bishops, even many conservative bishops, asked me about the prospects of immigration reform. This is a "hot button" issue in the political realm but most of the questioning came from a sense of pastoral solicitude, not from a political agenda.

Much attention focused on Cardinal Sean O'Malley, who represents North America on the Holy Father's Council of Cardinals. There have been times in the past when U.S. bishops used their influence with powerful Roman patrons to affect powerfully domestic ecclesiastical politics. In 1892, Archbishop Francesco Satolli came to the U.S. to represent the Holy See at the Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. He was met at the dock by Archbishop John Ireland, who carefully manipulated his schedule so that by the end of the trip, +Satolli had met all of +Ireland's friends and was a determined skeptic of +Ireland's nemesis, Archbishop Michael Corrigan. (In the sequel, +Satolli became the first Apostolic Delegate and, over time, became alienated from +Ireland.) In 1936, the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Pacelli, came to visit the U.S. Then-bishop Francis Spellman did what +Ireland had done, carefully controlling the cardinal's itinerary so that only +Spellman's friends were introduced. A few years later, when +Pacelli was elected Pope Pius XII, the terna for the vacant archdiocese of New York was sitting, unsigned, among the papers left by Pope Pius XI. At the top of the list was Cincinnati

Archbishop John McNicholas, O.P. The new pope chose +Spellman instead.

There are no such worries of ecclesiastical manipulativeness regarding Cardinal O'Malley. He wears the confidence the Holy Father has entrusted to him lightly. No one, literally no one, worries that he would undercut the leadership of the USCCB as his predecessor in Boston, Cardinal William Henry O'Connell tried to do in 1922, actually securing an edict from Rome suppressing the still young bishops' conference, an edict that was quickly negated after protests from the U.S. bishops. O'Malley leads with a soft touch, as evidenced by the interview he gave to the Boston Globe [1] this week. Here was the "Francis effect," presented as an invitation to the Church to celebrate Her works of mercy, not as a cudgel with which to beat down anyone else.

Everyone likes new USCCB President Joseph Kurtz. Everyone. He enters into office at a challenging time, to be sure, but I did not hear a single word of frustration or fear that he would "throw his weight around" or lead the conference in a way that would alienate those bishops who did not vote for him. Similar sentiments were expressed about incoming Vice President Cardinal Daniel DiNardo: intensely smart, fun to be around, incisive, these were the comments I was picking up at the receptions and coffee klatches at the hotel and over dinner.

It will be interesting to see if there is any modification in the post-meeting statement on the HHS mandate, and I suspect there will be. Virtually every bishop thinks the mandate is a bad law, to be sure, but a large majority are worried that it is time to take the idea that we would actually close our ministries off the table. As Cardinal O'Malley said in the interview noted above, closing the ministries would also be an evil. I still blame the Obama administration for this mess, and all the bishops wish they did not have to deal with it. But, I get the sense that they also recognize that if they lose in the courts, and they might, they need to have a Plan B, as it were.

The strangest moment came for me during the discussion of whether the bishop should slap the candidate for confirmation, or merely extend the hand of peace. Ironically, Pope Francis had spoken about this that very morning in his homily at the Domus Santa Marta. Alas, I could not get a single bishop to propose my amendment from the floor: The Rite of Confirmation should allow the candidate to slap the bishop!

I would give my eye teeth to know what the Apostolic Nuncio is thinking. I suspect the vast majority of bishops welcome the pontificate of Pope Francis as a graced moment in the life of the Church, in which the hopefulness that can and should characterize our lives as followers of Christ will be highlighted, even if some of the cultural trends invite a more gloomy prognosis. But, regrettably, some of the bishops who are the true believers in the gloom-and-doom storyline are also some of the youngest bishops. And, it is some of these same young guns who do not quite seem to have grasped the Holy Father's invitation to simplicity. It was halfway between sad and shocking to see a gaggle of bishops getting into the largest stretch limousine I have ever seen in my life last night at dinnertime. One wag wondered if there was a hot tub in there and, pace Stephen Colbert, if the bishops would be wearing a one piece. Joking aside, it is not hard to hail a cab at this large hotel. There was no need for a stretch limo, still less a Hummer-limo. The people of God were paying for that limo. St. John Chrysostom said that extravagance of living was robbing from the poor. Francis, and the nuncio, have their work cut out for themselves.

Nine months into the pontificate of Pope Francis, the "Pope Francis effect" still needs to percolate up and through the episcopal bench. I recall a passage in Churchill's war memoirs. It is June of 1940 and the British troops still fighting in France after Dunkirk had been ordered to link up with the remnants of the French army to form a bridgehead around Brittany. The problem was that between the time the decision to form the bridgehead had been made, and the time the orders reached the troops, the French army had largely ceased to exist. "In itself the idea was sound, but there were no facts to clothe it with reality," wrote Churchill. This is what is needed among the bishops, some facts to clothe the reality of the Francis effect. Part of this is appointments. Part of this is holding up the Church's work with the poor. Part of this is not getting into stretch limos. It will happen, God willing, but it can't happen too quickly.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/21/2014 - 10:16*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/baltimore-homecoming

Links:
[1] http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2013/11/12/cardinal/YxEAiF9wCSqrTd1t4MQgoJ/story.html?s_campaign=sm_tw